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ABSTRACT

This monograph summarizes findings from surveys of teachers' attitudes toward their profession. The attitudes of public school teachers revealed in these surveys are remarkably uniform. Attitudes differ little by school level or location, or teachers' age, sex, or years of experience. Generally, teachers are dedicated to teaching and object most to factors that they feel detract from good teaching, such as low salaries, large classes, little preparation time, and insufficient support services. Teachers also feel limited in their ability to realize certain professional goals and perceive a lack of decision-making authority in the school. A brief overview is presented of literature focusing on teachers' perceptions of what teaching is like, their relations with bureaucracy, and their views on educational outcomes. (JD)

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LISTENING TO TEACHERS

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TEACHING IN AMERICA: THE POSSIBLE RENAISSANCE

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

ECS WORKING PAPER

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LISTENING TO TEACHERS

No. TR-85-2

Education Commission of the States
1860 Lincoln Street, Suite 300
Denver, Colorado 80295

Prepared by Richard P. Mills and Dennis L. Stout

December 1985

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Richard P. Mills is the special assistant for education to Governor Thomas H. Kean of New Jersey. Dennis L. Stout is a consultant for the Education Commission of the States.

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INTRODUCTION

For the last three years, states worked hard to redesign the teaching profession. But for the most part teachers have not been involved — as teachers themselves know well (Gallup, 1984).

This approach to reform isn't surprising. The states are responsible for establishing many of the standards that define the quality of teaching. There are no routine ways to involve teachers directly in the policy process. The sheer number of teachers -- 2.2 million — makes consultation difficult. And, clearly, teachers aren't the only people who understand teaching. Given the often-cited isolation of teachers, policy makers could reasonably conclude that teachers have an imperfect understanding of policy.

And yet there are important reasons why we should listen to teachers, and act on what we learn.

WHY LISTEN TO TEACHERS?

First, we should listen to teachers because we will need their support. At least seven new national studies have reported — or will report this year -- on the pattern of policy changes needed to attract qualified people to teaching.[1] Most will propose revolutionary changes in the way schools work and teachers teach. Surveys report that teachers support many of the reforms proposed so far. If this continues to be true, reformers can build on that support. If it is not true, we need to act now either to convince teachers or to modify what we will propose.

Second, to reform education without listening flies in the face of experience in management of change. A reasonable way to improve a process is to pay attention to fundamentals. After you understand the process at that level, then you think through what people at higher levels in the organization should do to support performance. Richard Elmore calls this "backward mapping." If our goal is more effective teaching, we would do well first to find out what teaching is like from the perspective of the practitioners. All too often, education policy goes the other way: the top of the organization defines policy with uncertain knowledge of what goes on in the classroom.

Third, time, resources and competing demands limit states' abilities to improve teaching. Before they leave teacher reform, policy leaders must ensure that teachers are empowered to carry on with reform. If policies do not appeal to the central interests of teachers, the momentum for long-term success won't be there.

Fourth, many of the teachers now teaching will still be in the classroom in the next decade. The prediction that we will replace half our teaching force in 10 years fuels interest in how states should recruit and train new teachers. But if half leave, half will stay. The best of the veterans will help train the new teachers. All the rest will help to convey long-established norms of what teaching is all about. So while we seize the opportunity to redefine the profession, we must also consider the teachers we have now.

Fifth, we should listen for reasons of consistency. We cannot continue to say that teaching and learning are at the heart of the matter without consulting teachers before we try to change that relationship.

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[1] American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, California Commission on the Teaching Profession, Committee for Economic Development, Education Commission of the States, The Holmes Group Consortium, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Evaluation, National Governor's Association.

WHAT TEACHERS ARE SAYING

Teachers have not been entirely silent in the current debate over educational reform. Recent surveys have provided outlets for some of their views.[2] If policy makers stopped to listen to what teachers are saying, this is what they would hear.

Teachers support the educational reform effort but feel left out. The majority of teachers approve of nearly all of the new reforms. Certain reforms, such as career ladders and pre-certification competency tests, receive the endorsement of over three-quarters of the teachers surveyed (Harris, 1984; Koppich, et al., 1985). They are almost unanimous (upwards of 95%) in supporting changes in working conditions and in incentives for drawing in and retaining qualified teachers. Even differential pay for teachers in shortage areas got the vote of half these teachers. Clearly, teachers want to be involved. However, most of them, close to three-fourths, feel that their voices have not been adequately heard (Harris, 1984).

Teachers are divided on the question of merit pay. The value of hearing teachers out is evident in their opposition to merit pay. Anywhere from 50% to 70% object to it (Gallup, 1984; Fuhrman, 1985; ERS, 1984; and Harris, 1984). Opponents doubt that the "merit" in merit pay can be determined fairly and objectively. If shown that fairness is possible, many of them would turn around and support merit pay. Gallup (1984) found that 75% of teachers believe that there are teachers in their schools who deserve merit pay, and 71% surveyed by Harris (1984) felt that merit pay would work if an objective standard could be devised.

Teachers think they could learn much more from their colleagues. One of the few signs of professional well-being in teaching is the respect teachers have for one another. Approximately 90% feel that their colleagues are good teachers (Harris, 1984) and 80% say their fellow teachers provide relatively satisfactory levels of support (NEA, 1983).

But few teachers can take as much advantage of other teachers' experience, educational practices and professional advice as they would like. There is a gap between ideals and reality:

> 87% believe they would learn from observing other teachers, but only 6% do so regularly;

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[2]Julia Koppich, William Gerritz and James W. Guthrie, The View from the Classroom, California Commission on the Teaching Profession, August 12, 1985; Alec Gallup, "The Gallup Poll of Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, Part I and II," Phi Delta Kappan, October 1984 and January 1985; Edward B. Fiske, "New York Times Teachers Poll," New York Times, September 19, 1982; Louis Harris and Associates, The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, June 1984 and September 1985; National Education Association, Nationwide Teacher Opinion Poll, 1983; Susan Fuhrman, "Interview," Eagleton Institute, September 5, 1985; and Educational Research Service, Educator Opinion Poll, September 1984.

> 77% feel they would benefit from being observed by other teachers, but only 3% have that experience;
>
> 92% would like assistance from fellow teachers to solve teaching and disciplinary problems, but only 33% receive it;
>
> 93% would like to be allotted time on the job for consulting with other teachers about professional matters, but only 14% can have time to consult.
> (Koppich, et al., 1985)

Teachers see mutual observation, discussion and assistance as major mechanisms for improving the quality of teaching. Yet these simple remedies are rarely used.

Teachers have ambivalent feelings toward administrators. Although teachers look to administrators, particularly principals, for approval and recognition (NEA, 1983), they do not feel they receive as much assistance from them as they could in solving discipline problems and overcoming barriers to constructive collegial relations:

> 98% of the teachers polled in California felt that principals should help them in handling problems with students and their parents, but only 58% regularly are helped;
>
> 96% believe the school administration should establish a formal system of help and support for new teachers, but only 15% claim that this type of system already exists.
> (Koppich, et al., 1985)

Poor or inconsistent administrator support is one of the most pressing concerns teachers face, making them generally more favorably disposed toward their schools than toward the people who run them (Gallup, 1984).

Teachers find teaching both satisfying and frustrating. Despite problems, teachers are satisfied with their performance: 40% are very satisfied and 35%, somewhat satisfied (Harris, 1984). Moreover, 85% feel they make a difference in their students (Koppich, et al., 1985) and 96% say they "love to teach" (Harris, 1984). The rewards of the profession for 66% come mainly from the students, in particular from helping them to learn (Fiske, 1982).

Although most teachers enjoy teaching, a large minority find it impossible to cope with the frustrations of their working conditions. Salaries are too low, classes too large, preparation time too scanty and administrative and parental support too meager (ERS, 1984; Harris, 1984; Fuhrman, 1985; NEA, 1983; Koppich, et al., 1985; and Gallup, 1984).

Half of all teachers feel that students, parents, and the society at large no longer respect them (Harris, 1984). Poor salaries are one sign of low prestige: "The salary seems to say anyone can do this" (Fiske, 1982). Teachers rank teaching number 1 of 12 major occupations in terms of the benefits it gives to society but number 12 in terms of the respect society grants it (Gallup, 1984).

Most telling, around half of the teachers claim that if they had to do it all over again, they would not enter teaching, a five-fold increase over 1966 (NEA, 1983; Fiske, 1982; and Fuhrman, 1985). A similar percentage would be reluctant to advise their children (Gallup, 1984) or any young person (Harris, 1984) to become a teacher.

Teachers feel overburdened with non-teaching tasks. Aside from low salaries (Gallup, 1984; Harris, 1984; and NEA, 1983), excessive paperwork and administrative duties are the major sources of discontent (NEA, 1983; and Fiske, 1982). Harris reports that 72% of teachers feel they spend too much time carrying out administrative routines, 13 out of 51 hours per week on average. These extra duties detract from time for good teaching (ERS, 1984). One-third of the California teachers complained of inadequate preparation time (Koppich, et al., 1985). More time would be available if extraneous duties were fewer and if moonlighting was less necessary: as many as 40% feel the need to work a second job (Koppich, et al., 1985).

Teachers leave teaching for higher salaries and to relieve frustrations. The foregoing complaints are serious enough to have led half of the current teaching force to consider abandoning teaching (Harris, 1985). Although in practice 80% will likely still be around for another five years (Fuhrman, 1985), as many as 10% are anxious to leave as soon as possible; 25% are biding their time until something promising comes along; and 15% cannot decide. That leaves barely half who plan to teach until retirement (NEA, 1983).

Low salary is the most common reason for leaving teaching (Gallup, 1984; and Fuhrman, 1985). But discipline problems, the low status of teaching and unmotivated students also figure prominently in decisions to quit (Gallup, 1984; and Harris, 1985). Over one-third feel that problems in schools and in the teaching profession make it difficult to attract good teachers in the first place (Gallup, 1984).

Teachers prize autonomy but would like to see it expanded beyond the classroom. Teachers get great satisfaction from their autonomy in the classroom (Fuhrman, 1985). Most teachers feel they have considerable influence in planning daily teaching assignments, developing a personal teaching style and adapting curricular standards to the particular educational needs of their students. The overwhelming majority are pleased with the flexibility they have in deciding how to teach (88%) and personally fulfilled in the use of their talents (83%) (NEA, 1983).

Autonomy outside the classroom is a different matter:

> 90% think they should have the right to participate in decisions about what should be taught at their school, whereas only 41% actually have the opportunity to do so;
>
> 98% feel that teachers should work with administrators in setting the school's discipline policy, yet 58 percent are uninvolved;
>
> 98% would like teachers' preferences to be considered in making teaching assignments, but less than half (42%) say that such is the case in their district;
>
> 84% believe teachers should have some say in assigning students to classes, contrasted with only 28% who do;

> 78% think teachers should be included in the selection of new teachers to their schools, while only 15% lay claim to such authority.
> (Koppich, et al., 1985)

The attitudes of American public school teachers revealed in these surveys are remarkably uniform. Attitudes differ little by school level or location, or teachers' age, sex, or years of experience (Gallup, 1984; and Koppich, et al., 1985). Teachers are dedicated to teaching and object most to factors that they feel detract from good teaching: low salaries, large classes, little preparation time, and insufficient support services.

Teachers also feel limited in their ability to realize certain professional goals. They lack decision-making authority in the school. They desire more productive and fulfilling relations with their peers. They "find little correlation between what their professional knowledge and expertise tells them and their actual experience in the classroom" (Koppich, et al., 1985, p. 25).

WHAT TEACHING IS LIKE

Several illuminating studies add to our understanding of teaching.[3] The picture of teaching they paint is of a semiprofession trying to survive in an anti-professional organizational environment. Fraught with tensions it is incapable of resolving, teaching has been forced to compromise its sense of identity and integrity.

Teaching is a craft, not a technical profession. Although some educational reformers conceptualize teaching as a rational process where goals are clearly defined and the best means are (or should be) selected for achieving those goals, that concept is rarely shared by teachers and their close observers (Darling-Hammond and Wise).

Teachers conceive the outcomes of teaching to be diverse, long-range, peculiar to each student, and difficult to measure. They strive to influence the whole personality of their students, not simply students' intellect. They expect to have greatest effect not within the classroom but over time, as the children mature and develop. They anticipate that students will respond to their teaching as individuals, according to personality, motivation and experiences. They concede that outcomes are difficult to measure (Lortie; and Cohen, et al.).

The large element of uncertainty about objectives contributes to uncertainty in the choice of instructional practices. Teachers shy away from theoretical approaches to teaching and do not, as a rule, defer to a formal body of technical language. They tend

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[3]David Cohen, Eleanor Farrar and Barbara Neufeld, "Teaching Practice from the Practitioner's Perspective," The Huron Institute, Cambridge, MA, April 1, 1983; Linda Darling-Hammond and Arthur Wise, "A Conceptual Framework for Examining Teachers' Views of Teaching and Educational Policies," Rand Cooperation, Santa Monica, CA, February 1981; Daniel I. Duke, Teaching: The Imperiled Profession (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Sara Freedman, Jane Jackson and Katherine Boles, "Teaching: An Imperiled 'Profession'," in Gary Sykes and Lee S. Shulman (eds.) Handbook of Teaching and Policy (NY: Longman, 1983), pp. 261-299; John I. Goodlad, A Place Called School (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1984); Philip W. Jackson, Life in Classrooms (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller, Teachers, Their World, and Their Work (Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1984); Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, "The Lives of Teachers," in Sykes and Shulman (eds.) op. cit., pp. 241-260; Richard P. Lipka and L. R. Goulet, "Aging -- And Experience-Related Changes in Teacher Attitudes toward the Profession," Educational Research Quarterly, Summer 1979, pp. 19-28; Dan C. Lortie, Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Malcolm A. Lowther, David W. Chapman, and Joan S. Stark, "Perceptions of Work-Related Conditions Among Teachers and Persons in Other Occupations," Journal of Educational Research, May/June 1984, pp. 277-282; Gertrude McPherson, Small town Teacher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Theodore Sizer, Horace's Compromise (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984); and Willard Waller, The Sociology of Teaching (NY: John Wiley, 1982).

toward the practical and deny that there is one best way to teach. Instead, teachers rely on their personal judgment.

Uncertainty is also inherent in the relationship between teacher and student. Whether and how much a student learns is in part beyond the teacher's control, affected by the student's own attitudes toward the subject, the style of teaching and the teacher as a person (Goodlad; Cohen, et al.; Lieberman and Miller).

To work effectively, teachers need flexibility, the ability to shape lesson plans to fit the learning needs of each student, inspiration, and the ability to motivate students. Teachers must build empathy and trust with students. Trust is required because teachers teach groups of students and must create authority within the group. Without trust, students become uncooperative, indifferent, perhaps even hostile (Sizer).

How do teachers know if they are doing a good job? They down play objective group results as in standardized testing. Administrators' opinions are valued as signs of their position in the school, but not as signs of good teaching (Darling-Hammond and Wise; Lipka and Goulet). Ultimately, teachers consider students the best judges of teaching skills (Cohen, et al.). Actual outcomes are too distant and intangible, so teachers focus upon more immediate indications of student interest and involvement (Jackson).

As a result, teachers prize the quality of personal relations they develop with students (being liked and respected), and the quality of social life in the classroom (how well students relate as a group).

Teaching is a battle against bureaucracy. The problems of teaching have been greatly affected by the structure of the schools. Over the past several decades, external testing programs, standardized curricula, social legislation, court decisions, and state controls proliferated. These changes further bureaucratized the traditional school hierarchy and regulated and constrained teachers' behavior (Darling-Hammond and Wise; Duke; Cohen, et al.; and Lieberman and Miller).

Professionalism, far from elevating the position of teachers, has actually lowered it. Educational experts became key decision-makers, to the chagrin of teachers held accountable for students' progress (now measured by the experts). The power of the central administration flourished as specialized resources, allocated from the center, became more widely used. At the same time, research on "effective teaching" sought to reduce teaching to a narrow set of simple operations, an exercise in a pedagogical textbook (Freedman et al.; and Duke).

These changes within the wider organizational context of the public school have forced teachers into practices that leave many unsatisfied with their teaching. The formal structure of the school, its rules, regulations and organization, are incongruent with the values that practitioners think should govern teacher and administrator behavior.

This conflict between the formal and the ideal accounts for many of the paradoxes in teaching: teaching is very social but teachers are lonely; teachers value flexibility but favor safe routines; teachers have autonomy but are highly directed in what they can do; teachers strive for spontaneity but stress orderliness. There is a distinct conflict between the ideal of teaching as a craft and the reality of teaching as a job in an impersonal organization. Teachers find it difficult to integrate the two (Lieberman and Miller; Sizer; Darling-Hammond and Wise).

Teachers battle against bureaucracy by retreating. They isolate themselves from one another, deriving their greatest satisfaction from students. Relations with colleagues tend to be superficial, just jousting and griping. Although this does offer emotional support and relief from daily frustrations, it does not enable teachers to gain control over their craft.

Bureaucratic management also sows seeds of distrust among teachers. They lack group consciousness and cohesion, effectively limiting their power within the school. Their outlook becomes too class-bound, too self-centered for them to assert the right to speak for the general interest of the entire school, which includes students, parents, faculty and administration.

The conflict between the formal and the ideal most often manifests itself in the conflict between teachers and administrators, especially between teachers and principals. Teachers' skills and knowledge do not extend much beyond the classroom. Do they really understand good school leadership? Similarly, principals' skills do not extend into the classroom. Do they really understand good teaching? Principals must simply rely on evidence that the classes are orderly and that the students like the teacher. As the teacher tries to fulfill the principal's demands for order, he or she often becomes demoralized because such goals conflict with the loftier goals of teaching (Cohen, et al.).

There are other conflicts. Teaching demands that the whole personality be engaged. Teachers always feel they could do more. To limit the demands of the job, teachers will adopt routines that draw boundaries between what they will and will not do. Although daily tensions are thereby relieved, it is done at the cost of what teachers themselves consider good teaching, and frustration results (Lightfoot).

Conflict also arises between the demand that all children be treated as equals in conformity to universal standards, on the one hand, and the desire for good personal relations with students as individuals, on the other hand. Teachers are tugged in opposite directions (Lightfoot).

Beyond the classroom, conflict heightens. Teachers feel uncomfortable around their peers and the public because they are unsure of their own competence as teachers. They question whether they could defend their ability in front of others. Their dependence upon children for job satisfaction leaves them with a sense of vulnerability before adults. They feel childish and are often treated as if they were. Although to them their job is very important, they are not adequately appreciated and respected in society, in contrast to the way the students treat them in the classroom (Lieberman and Miller).

Organizations not only present many conflicts to teachers but also fail to provide them with opportunities for managing conflicts. Being able to change work assignments and looking forward to promotions helps many employees deal with discontent about their present jobs. They anticipate doing well and moving up and out. This strengthens their ambition and interest in high quality performance.

Teaching is peculiar in that it offers little room for advancement. Moreover, duties rarely change throughout a teacher's career. Teachers cannot expect a promotion if they perform exceptionally, unless their aim is to leave teaching and become an administrator. Gradually, for the most ambitious, discontent will build up. They will

burn out, their performance will lag, and, as a last option, they will leave (Lowther et al.; and Lipka and Goulet). Even if they do not actually leave, they will often fantasize about leaving (Lightfoot; Duke; and Freedman, et al.).

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD BE ASKED OF OUR CLASSROOM TEACHERS?

Here are some suggestions that seem reasonable after reading the various surveys of teacher opinion.

1. What is the most important problem that you face as a teacher? How would you like to see this resolved? What can state leaders do about it? What can teachers do?

2. How does the school environment support your efforts to be effective as a teacher? How does it impede those efforts? Some say we need a radical reconstruction of the way schools work. Others argue for more gradual changes. What do you say?

3. What school decisions should you be involved in as a teacher? How would this involvement help your students?

4. Should teachers be responsible for setting and maintaining the standards of the profession? If you think so, how would it work? If not, who should be responsible?

5. Would you change the way time is used in the schools? Teacher surveys show that teachers want more time with colleagues. They also support tougher graduation standards for students, which may imply more courses. The surveys also show that teachers oppose longer work days and work years. How can we resolve this?

6. Are you satisfied with the results of your teaching? If so, what could be done to enhance these results? If not, what could be done to improve things? Who should do it?

7. If you could spend more time on the job with other teachers, what would you do? How would your students benefit?

THE SEARCH FOR A WIDER PARTNERSHIP

Policy leaders and teachers have separate and distinct roles. But they need better links than they have had. The main theme of this initiative is that there are opportunities for dialogue. Can we create mechanisms for routine consultation with teachers as a part of educational policy making?

Because the changes in teaching must be implemented within schools and districts, state policy leaders must consider how to involve principals, superintendents and boards. What incentives can we offer them to earn their cooperation? How do we involve teachers without hopelessly disrupting the local governance and administration of the school? Effective answers to these questions are critical to the Teacher Renaissance.